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Firearms, crime, and criminal justice

Guns Used in Crime

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How often are guns used in violent crimes?

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), almost 43.6 million criminal victimizations occurred in 1993, including 4.4 million violent crimes of rape and sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. Of the victims of these violent crimes, 1.3 million (29%) stated that they faced an offender with a firearm.*

In 1993, the FBI's *Crime in the United States* estimated that almost 2 million violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault were reported to the police by citizens. About 582,000 of these reported murders, robberies, and aggravated assaults were committed with firearms. Murder was the crime that most frequently involved firearms; 70% of the 24,526 murders in 1993 were committed with firearms.

How do we know about the guns used by criminals?

No national collection of data contains detailed information about all of the guns used in crimes. Snapshots of

Highlights

- Although most crime is not committed with guns, most gun crime is committed with handguns. *pages 1 & 2*
- Although most available guns are not used in crime, information about the 223 million guns available to the general public provides a context for evaluating criminal preferences for guns. *page 2*
- By definition, stolen guns are available to criminals. The FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) stolen gun file contains over 2 million reports; 60% are reports of stolen handguns. *page 3*
- In 1994, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) received over 85,132 requests from law enforcement agencies for traces of guns used in crime. Over three-quarters of the guns traced by the ATF in 1994 were handguns (mostly pistols), and almost a third were less than 3 years old. *page 4*
- Surveys of inmates show that they prefer concealable, large caliber guns. Juvenile offenders appear to be more likely to possess guns than adults. *page 5*
- Studies of the guns used in homicides show that large caliber revolvers are the most frequent type of gun used in homicides, but the number of large caliber semiautomatic guns used in murders is increasing. *page 5*
- Little information exists about the use of assault weapons in crime. The information that does exist uses varying definitions of assault weapons that were developed before the Federal assault weapons ban was enacted. *page 6*

information about the guns used by criminals are available from—

- official police records concerning the guns recovered in crimes and reports gathered from victims
- surveys that interview criminals
- surveys that interview victims of crime.

From these sources, we know how often guns are involved in crime, how guns are used in crime, what general categories of firearms are most often used in crime, and, to a limited extent, the specific types of guns most frequently used by criminals.

* See note on page 7.

What are the different types of firearms?	
Types	
Handgun	A weapon designed to fire a small projectile from one or more barrels when held in one hand with a short stock designed to be gripped by one hand.
Revolver	A handgun that contains its ammunition in a revolving cylinder that typically holds five to nine cartridges, each within a separate chamber. Before a revolver fires, the cylinder rotates, and the next chamber is aligned with the barrel.
Pistol	Any handgun that does not contain its ammunition in a revolving cylinder. Pistols can be manually operated or semiautomatic. A semiautomatic pistol generally contains cartridges in a magazine located in the grip of the gun. When the semiautomatic pistol is fired, the spent cartridge that contained the bullet and propellant is ejected, the firing mechanism is cocked, and a new cartridge is chambered.
Derringer	A small single- or multiple-shot handgun other than a revolver or semiautomatic pistol.
Rifle	A weapon intended to be fired from the shoulder that uses the energy of the explosive in a fixed metallic cartridge to fire only a single projectile through a rifled bore for each single pull of the trigger.
Shotgun	A weapon intended to be fired from the shoulder that uses the energy of the explosive in a fixed shotgun shell to fire through a smooth bore either a number of ball shot or a single projectile for each single pull of the trigger.
Firing action	
Fully automatic	Capability to fire a succession of cartridges so long as the trigger is depressed or until the ammunition supply is exhausted. Automatic weapons are considered machineguns subject to the provisions of the National Firearms Act.
Semiautomatic	An autoloading action that will fire only a single shot for each single function of a trigger.
Machinegun	Any weapon that shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot automatically more than one shot without manual reloading by a single function of the trigger.
Submachinegun	A simple fully automatic weapon that fires a pistol cartridge that is also referred to as a machine pistol.
Ammunition	
Caliber	The size of the ammunition that a weapon is designed to shoot, as measured by the bullet's approximate diameter in inches in the United States and in millimeters in other countries. In some instances, ammunition is described with additional terms, such as the year of its introduction (.30/06) or the name of the designer (.30 Newton). In some countries, ammunition is also described in terms of the length of the cartridge case (7.62 x 63 mm).
Gauge	For shotguns, the number of spherical balls of pure lead, each exactly fitting the bore, that equals one pound.

Sources: ATF, *Firearms & Explosives Tracing Guidebook*, September 1993, pp. 35-40, and Paul C. Giannelli, "Ballistics Evidence: Firearms Identification," *Criminal Law Bulletin*, May-June 1991, pp. 195-215.

Handguns are most often the type of firearm used in crime

- According to the Victim Survey (NCVS), 25% of the victims of rape and sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault in 1993 faced an offender armed with a handgun. Of all firearm-related crime reported to the survey, 86% involved handguns.
- The FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports show that 57% of all murders in 1993 were committed with handguns, 3% with rifles, 5% with shotguns, and 5% with firearms where the type was unknown.
- The 1991 Survey of State Prison Inmates found that violent inmates who used a weapon were more likely to use a handgun than any other weapon; 24% of all violent inmates reported that they used a handgun. Of all inmates, 13% reported carrying a handgun when they committed the offense for which they were serving time.

What types of guns do criminals prefer?

Research by Wright and Rossi in the 1980's found that most criminals prefer guns that are easily concealable, large caliber, and well made. Their studies also found that the handguns used by the felons interviewed were similar to the handguns available to the general public, except that the criminals preferred larger caliber guns.

What types of guns are available generally?

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) estimates that from 1899 to 1993 about 223 million guns became available in the United States, including over 79 million rifles, 77 million handguns, and 66 million shotguns. The number of guns seized, destroyed, lost, or not working is unknown.

The number of new handguns added to those available has exceeded the number of new shotguns and rifles in recent years. More than half of the guns added in 1993 were handguns.

Over 40 million handguns have been produced in the United States since 1973.

Since over 80% of the guns available in the United States are manufactured here, gun production is a reasonable indicator of the guns made available. From 1973 to 1993, U.S. manufacturers produced —

- 6.6 million .357 Magnum revolvers
- 6.5 million .38 Special revolvers
- 5.4 million .22 caliber pistols
- 5.3 million .22 caliber revolvers
- 4.5 million .25 caliber pistols
- 3.1 million 9 millimeter pistols
- 2.4 million .380 caliber pistols
- 2.2 million .44 Magnum revolvers
- 1.7 million .45 caliber pistols
- 1.2 million .32 caliber revolvers.

During the two decades from 1973 to 1993, the types of handguns most frequently produced have changed. Most new handguns are pistols rather than revolvers. Pistol production grew from 28% of the handguns produced in the United States in 1973 to 80% in 1993.

The number of large caliber pistols produced annually increased substantially after 1986. Until the mid-1980's, most pistols produced in the United States were .22 and .25 caliber models. Production of .380 caliber and 9 millimeter pistols began to increase substantially in 1987, so that by 1993 they became the most frequently produced pistols. From 1991 to 1993, the last 3 years for which data are available, the most frequently produced handguns were —

- .380 caliber pistols (20%)
- 9 millimeter pistols (19%)
- .22 caliber pistols (17%)
- .25 caliber pistols (13%)
- .50 caliber pistols (8%).

Stolen guns are a source of weapons for criminals

All stolen guns are available to criminals by definition. Recent studies of adult and juvenile offenders show that many have either stolen a firearm or kept, sold, or traded a stolen firearm:

- According to the 1991 Survey of State Prison Inmates, among those inmates who possessed a handgun, 9% had acquired it through theft, and 28% had acquired it through an illegal market such as a drug dealer or fence. Of all inmates, 10% had stolen at least one gun, and 11% had sold or traded stolen guns.

- Studies of adult and juvenile offenders that the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services conducted in 1992 and 1993 found that 15% of the adult offenders and 19% of the juvenile offenders had stolen guns; 16% of the adults and 24% of the juveniles had kept a stolen gun; and 20% of the adults and 30% of the juveniles had sold or traded a stolen gun.

- From a sample of juvenile inmates in four States, Sheley and Wright found that more than 50% had stolen a gun at least once in their lives and 24% had stolen their most recently obtained handgun. They concluded that theft and burglary were the original, not always the proximate, source of many guns acquired by the juveniles.

How many guns are stolen?

The Victim Survey (NCVS) estimates that there were 341,000 incidents of firearm theft from private citizens annually from 1987 to 1992. Because the survey does not ask how many guns were stolen, the number of guns stolen probably exceeds the number of incidents of gun theft.

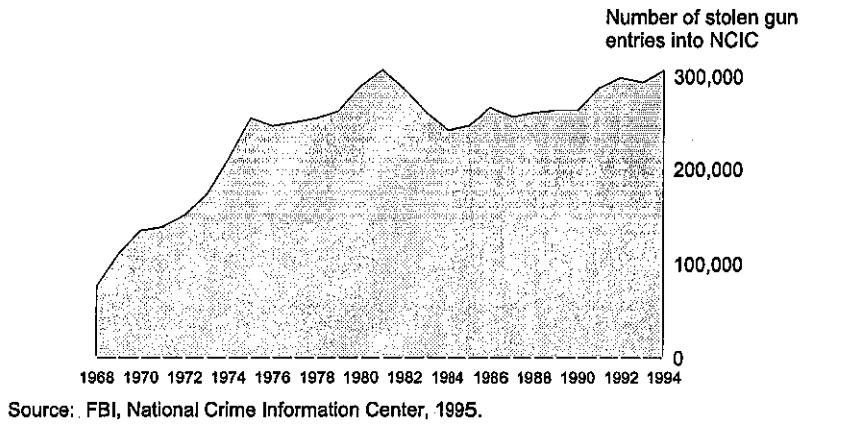
The FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) stolen gun file contained over 2 million reports as of March 1995. In 1994, over 306,000 entries were added to this file including a variety of guns, ammunition, cannons, and grenades. Reports of stolen guns are included in the NCIC files when citizens report a theft to law enforcement agencies that submit a report to the FBI. All entries must include make, caliber, and serial number. Initiated in 1967, the NCIC stolen gun file retains all entries indefinitely unless a recovery is reported.

Most stolen guns are handguns

Victims report to the Victim Survey that handguns were stolen in 53% of the thefts of guns. The FBI's stolen gun file's 2 million reports include information on —

- 1.26 million handguns (almost 60%)
- 470,000 rifles (22%)
- 356,000 shotguns (17%).

From 1985 to 1994, the FBI received an annual average of over 274,000 reports of stolen guns



How many automatic weapons are stolen?

Under the provisions of the National Firearms Act, all automatic weapons such as machine guns must be registered with the ATF. In 1995, over 240,000 automatic weapons were registered with the ATF. As of March 1995, the NCIC stolen gun file contained reports on about 7,700 machine guns and submachine guns.

What types of handguns are most frequently stolen?

Most frequently reported handguns in the NCIC stolen gun file

Percent of stolen handguns	Number	Caliber	Type
20.5%	259,184	.38	Revolver
11.7	147,681	.22	Revolver
11.6	146,474	.357	Revolver
8.8	111,558	9 mm	Semiautomatic
7.0	87,714	.25	Semiautomatic
6.7	84,474	.22	Semiautomatic
5.4	68,112	.380	Semiautomatic
3.7	46,503	.45	Semiautomatic
3.3	41,318	.32	Revolver
3.1	39,254	.44	Revolver
1.5	18,377	.32	Semiautomatic
1.3	16,214	.45	Revolver

Upon request, the ATF traces some guns used in crime to their origin

The National Tracing Center of ATF traces firearms to their original point of sale upon the request of police agencies. The requesting agency can use this information to assist in identifying suspects, providing evidence for subsequent prosecution, establishing stolen status, and proving ownership. The number of requests for firearms traces increased from 37,181 in 1990 to 85,132 in 1994.

Trace requests represent an unknown portion of all the guns used in crimes. ATF is not able to trace guns manufactured before 1968, most surplus military weapons, imported guns without the importer's name, stolen guns, and guns missing a legible serial number.

Police agencies do not request traces on all firearms used in crimes. Not all firearms used in crimes are recovered so that a trace could be done and, in some States and localities, the police agencies may be able to establish ownership locally without going to the ATF.

Most trace requests concern handguns

Over half of the guns that police agencies asked ATF to trace were pistols and another quarter were revolvers.

Type of gun	Percent of all 1994 traces
Total	100.0%
Handgun	79.1
Pistol	53.0
Pistol Revolver	24.7
Pistol Derringer	1.4
Rifle	11.1
Shotgun	9.7
Other including machinegun	0.1

While trace requests for all types of guns increased in recent years, the number of pistols traced increased the most, doubling from 1990 to 1994.

What are the countries of origin of the guns that are traced?

Traced guns come from many countries across the globe. However, 78% of the guns that were traced in 1994 originated in the United States and most of the rest were from —

- Brazil (5%)
- Germany (3%)
- China (3%)
- Austria (3%)
- Italy (2%)
- Spain (2%).

Almost a third of the guns traced by ATF in 1994 were 3 years old or less

Age of traced guns	Traces completed in 1994	
	Number	Percent
Total	83,362	100%
Less than 1 year	4,072	5
1 year	11,617	14
2 years	6,764	8
3 years	4,369	5

What crimes are most likely to result in a gun-tracing request?

Crime type	Percent of all 1994 traces	Percent of traces by crime type						
		Handgun		Pistol	Pistol Derringer	Pistol Revolver	Rifle	Shotgun
Weapons offenses	72%	100%	81%	55%	1%	25%	10%	9%
Drug offenses	12	100	75	50	2	23	14	11
Homicide	6	100	79	49	1	29	11	10
Assault	5	100	80	50	1	28	10	11
Burglary	2	100	57	34	1	22	24	19
Robbery	2	100	84	53	1	29	7	10
Other	2	100	76	54	1	21	14	10

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
Source: ATF, unpublished data, May 1995.

What guns are the most frequently traced?

The most frequently traced guns vary from year to year. The ATF publishes a list of the 10 specific guns most frequently traced annually. The total number of traced guns on the top 10 list was 18% of the total traced from 1991 to 1994. Most of the top 10 guns were pistols (over 30% were .25 caliber pistols), although a number of revolvers and a few shotguns and rifles were also included. The most frequently traced gun was a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver in 1990, the Raven Arms P25 (a .25 caliber pistol) from 1991 through 1993, and the Lorcin P25 in 1994.

10 most frequently traced guns in 1994

Rank	Manufacturer	Model	Caliber	Type	Number traced
1	Lorcin	P25	.25	Pistol	3,223
2	Davis Industries	P380	.38	Pistol	2,454
3	Raven Arms	MP25	.25	Pistol	2,107
4	Lorcin	L25	.25	Pistol	1,258
5	Mossburg	500	12G	Shotgun	1,015
6	Phoenix Arms	Raven	.25	Pistol	959
7	Jennings	J22	.22	Pistol	929
8	Ruger	P89	9 mm	Pistol	895
9	Glock	17	9 mm	Pistol	843
10	Bryco	38	.38	Pistol	820

Source: ATF, May 1995.

What caliber guns do criminals prefer?

In their 1983 study, Wright, Rossi, and Daly asked a sample of felons about the handgun they had most recently acquired. Of the felons sampled—

- 29% had acquired a .38 caliber handgun
- 20% had acquired a .357 caliber handgun
- 16% had acquired a .22 caliber handgun.

Sheley and Wright found that the juvenile inmates in their 1991 sample in four States preferred large caliber, high quality handguns. Just prior to their confinement—

- 58% owned a revolver, usually a .38 or .357 caliber gun
- 55% owned a semiautomatic handgun, usually a 9 millimeter or .45 caliber gun
- 51% owned a sawed-off shotgun
- 35% owned a military-style automatic or semiautomatic rifle.

Do juvenile offenders use different types of guns than adult offenders?

A study of adult and juvenile offenders by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services found that juvenile offenders were more likely than adults to have carried a semiautomatic pistol at the crime scene (18% versus 7%).

They were also more likely to have carried a revolver (10% versus 7%). The same proportion of adults and juveniles (3%) carried a shotgun or rifle at the crime scene.

Some studies of guns used in homicides provide information about caliber

McGonigal and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center studied firearm homicides that occurred in Philadelphia: 145 in 1985 and 324 in 1990. Most of the firearms used in the homicides studied were handguns: 90% in 1985 and 95% in 1990. In both years, revolvers were the predominant type of handgun used; however, the use of semiautomatic pistols increased from 24% in 1985 to 38% in 1990. The caliber of the handguns used also changed:

In Philadelphia, handguns most often used:

In 1985, of 91 homicides	In 1990, of 204 homicides
44% .38 caliber revolver	23% 9 mm pistol
19% .25 caliber pistol	18% .38 caliber revolver
14% .22 caliber revolver	16% .357 caliber revolver
14% .32 caliber revolver	16% .22 caliber revolver
3% 9 mm pistol	10% .32 caliber revolver
2% .357 caliber revolver	6% .380 caliber pistol

The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services studied 844 homicides that occurred in 18 jurisdictions

from 1989 through 1991. Firearms were identified as the murder weapon in 600 cases. Over 70% of the firearms used were handguns. Of those handguns for which the caliber and firing action could be identified, 19% were .38 caliber revolvers, 10% were .22 caliber revolvers, and 9% were 9 millimeter semiautomatic pistols.

The Hawaii Department of the Attorney General, Crime Prevention Division, studied 59 firearm-related homicides in Honolulu from 1988 to 1992. Handguns were used in 48 homicides (over 80%) including 11 handguns of 9 millimeter caliber, 10 of .357 caliber, 10 of .38 caliber, and 5 of .25 caliber.

What caliber guns are used in the killings of law enforcement officers?

From 1982 to 1993, of the 687 officers who were killed by firearms other than their own guns, more were killed by .38 caliber handguns than by any other type of weapon.

Type of firearm	Percent of law enforcement officers killed with a firearm
.38 caliber handgun	25.2%
.357 Magnum handgun	12.1
9 millimeter handgun	9.5
12 gauge shotgun	7.4
.22 caliber handgun	5.4
.22 caliber rifle	4.4

How often are assault weapons used in crime?

Little information exists about the use of assault weapons in crime. The information that does exist uses varying definitions of assault weapons that were developed before the Federal assault weapons ban was enacted.

In general, assault weapons are semiautomatic firearms with a large magazine of ammunition that were designed and configured for rapid fire and combat use. An assault weapon can be a pistol, a rifle, or a shotgun. The Federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 bans the manufacture and sale of 19 specific assault weapons identified by make and manufacturer. It also provides for a ban on those weapons that have a combination of features such as flash suppressors and grenade launchers. The ban does not cover those weapons legally possessed before the law was enacted. The National Institute of Justice will be evaluating the effect of the ban and reporting to Congress in 1997.

In 1993 prior to the passage of the assault weapons ban, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), reported that about 1% of the estimated 200 million guns

in circulation were assault weapons. Of the gun-tracing requests received that year by ATF from law enforcement agencies, 8% involved assault weapons.

Assault weapons and homicide

A New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services study of homicides in 1993 in New York City found that assault weapons were involved in 16% of the homicides studied. The definition of assault weapons used was from proposed but not enacted State legislation that was more expansive than the Federal legislation. By matching ballistics records and homicide files, the study found information on 366 firearms recovered in the homicides of 271 victims. Assault weapons were linked to the deaths of 43 victims (16% of those studied).

A study by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services reviewed the files of 600 firearm murders that occurred in 18 jurisdictions from 1989 to 1991. The study found that handguns were used in 72% of the murders (431 murders). Ten guns were identified as assault weapons, including five pistols, four rifles, and one shotgun.

Assault weapons and offenders

In the 1991 BJS Survey of State Inmates, about 8% of the inmates reported that they had owned a military-type weapon, such as an Uzi, AK-47, AR-15, or M-16. Less than 1% said that they carried such a weapon when they committed the incident for which they were incarcerated. A Virginia inmate survey conducted between November 1992 and May 1993 found similar results: About 10% of the adult inmates reported that they had ever possessed an assault rifle, but none had carried it at the scene of a crime.

Two studies indicate higher proportions of juvenile offenders reporting possession and use of assault rifles. The Virginia inmate survey also covered 192 juvenile offenders. About 20% reported that they had possessed an assault rifle and 1% said that they had carried it at the scene of a crime. In 1991, Sheley and Wright surveyed 835 serious juvenile offenders incarcerated in 6 facilities in 4 States. In the Sheley and Wright study, 35% of the juvenile inmates reported that they had owned a military-style automatic or semiautomatic rifle just prior to confinement.

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Note

Data in this report from the 1993 National Crime Victimization Survey are the first released on this topic since the survey was redesigned. Because of changes in the methodology, direct comparisons with BJS's victim survey data from prior years are not appropriate. Additional information about the survey's redesign can be obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics Clearinghouse at 1-800-732-3277.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics is the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. Jan M. Chaiken, Ph.D., is director.

BJS Selected Findings summarize statistics about a topic of current concern from both BJS and non-BJS datasets.

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Guns Used in Crime is the first of a series of reports on firearms and crime that will become part of a longer document, *Firearms, Crime, and Criminal Justice*. Other topics to be covered in this series include weapons offenses and offenders, how criminals obtain guns, and intentional firearm injury. The full report will focus on the use of guns in crime, trends in gun crime, consequences of gun crimes, characteristics of offenders who use guns, and sanctions for offenders who use guns. This report will not cover the involvement of firearms in accidents or suicides.